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**Citation for published version:**

Loughnan, S & Pacilli, MG 2014, 'Seeing (and treating) others as sexual objects: Toward a more complete mapping of sexual objectification', *Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 309-325. <https://doi.org/10.4473/TPM21.3.6>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.4473/TPM21.3.6](https://doi.org/10.4473/TPM21.3.6)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology

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Seeing (and treating) others as sexual objects: Towards a more complete mapping of sexual objectification

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Word Count: 8,832 (max 10,000).

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### Abstract

Sexual objectification has long been subject to academic enquiry. However, it is only in the last five years that psychologists have focused on measuring the interpersonal aspects of being objectified. In this article, we look first at the varieties of objectification, examining how objectification is conceptualized by different researchers. We examine who is the target of objectification, and who is likely to objectify. This reveals that objectification is widespread; although women tend to be the victims of objectification more than men. Further, we find that sex, aggression, and dislike play important roles for both genders in creating objectification. Although work on the consequences of being objectified is relatively new, we cover this growing area of work. We find that objectification changes both the ways people are viewed and the ways they are treated by others. Finally, we offer some new directions for researchers to move forward research in this domain.

Word Count: 150

Keywords: Objectification; Sex; Gender; Social Psychology; Dehumanization; Morality.

People are fundamentally social, and an important aspect of their sociality revolves around sex. Sexual objectification – seeing or treating another person as a sexualized object – have long been identified within philosophy as one of the darker sides of human sexuality. The psychology of sexual objectification has typically been studied from a clinical perspective, with a focus on how people view themselves, and the consequences of self-objectification for psychological wellbeing and psychopathology. There is now an extensive literature on the physical and psychological processes and costs of viewing oneself as a sexual object (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2012; Moradi & Huang, 2008). This work was typically *intrapersonal* – focused on how, when, and why people view themselves as sexual objects. The interpersonal or social psychological aspect of sexual objectification – how, when, and why people sexually objectify others – has only very recently attracted research attention. It is to this emerging field on interpersonal sexual objectification that we turn our attention in this review.

This review will attempt to provide a broad yet detailed account of interpersonal sexual objectification. We will begin by defining sexual objectification more fully and mapping out its intellectual history. In doing so, we will highlight the range of ways in which psychologists have theorised about objectification, and the impact this has on the way objectification is measured. Armed with this definition and understanding of the origins of the idea, we will more fully examine who is objectified and who is objectifying them. We will see that both genders suffer and engage in sexual objectification, although women bear the brunt of the burden. We will cover the consequences of being objectified for the victim, and how these consequences might be confronted. Finally, having summarized and organized the existent literature, we will attempt to point to some fertile new domains for objectification research, before offering some concluding remarks.

### **What is Objectification?**

The concept of sexual objectification appeared for the first time in the philosophical field thanks to the work of Immanuel Kant (for a review, see Papadaki, 2007). For Kant (1785) sexual objectification occurs when we consider a person not as an “end-in-itself”, but only as a means of satisfying our own sexual desire and pleasure. From this perspective, sexual objectification is particularly likely to happen when a partner is conceived of solely in terms of their sexual usefulness, in the times Kant was writing this meant sexuality beyond the context of marriage. After a period of around 200 years of relative neglect, this concept has been reformulated by

feminist scholars, such as Andrea Dworkin (2000) and Catharine MacKinnon (1982). Like Kant, feminist thinkers firmly located objectification within the domain of sex, pointing to pornography as the quintessential form of female objectification, in which the woman is described and turns into a sex object, always accessible and available to men. Unlike Kant however, they also define sexual objectification in gendered terms, arguing that it is a powerful manifestation of broader gender inequalities. Thus, feminist thinkers took objectification outside of the marital/extramarital context and located it as a form of gender oppression.

A second major advance provided by feminist thinkers was to delineate objectification as an outcome, from objectification as a process. Sandra Bartky (1990) first argued that a person is objectified when her sexual body parts or sexual functions are artificially split from the rest of the person, reduced to the status of a mere tool and regarded as capable to describe and entirely represent her. Bartky describes an important distinction between objectification as a *process*, i.e. the act of symbolically separating the sexual parts of a person's body or her sexual functions from the rest of the person – and objectification as an *outcome*, the act of treating a person as if they had the status of a mere object.

The ways in which a person can be objectified have recently undergone considerable expansion. In her influential publication, Nussbaum (1995) defines objectification as treating a person as an object and identified instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity as its main manifestations. More recently, Langton (2009) added three further aspects to Nussbaum's list: treating a person as identified with her body (*reduction to body or body parts*); treating a person in terms of how she looks (*reduction to appearance*); treating a person as if she lacks the human capability to speak (*silencing*). The history and richness of recent characterizations of objectification speak to the complexity of this phenomenon. In the remainder of this section, we track how these philosophical works have translated into the psychological understanding and measure of objectification.

#### *Attitude and behaviour*

Nussbaum's (1995) theoretical proposal has deeply influenced research on sexual objectification. According to Nussbaum, *treating* persons as objects is the core element of sexual objectification. Yet, the word *treat* presents a very wide meaning, since it may be a matter of *attitude*, namely how a person regards someone else or a matter of *behavior*, namely what a person does to someone else (Langton, 2004). Although attitudes and behaviors can meaningfully diverge (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), in sexual objectification research, these two dimensions are

often conflated - both theoretically and empirically - in the same definition. In social psychology research, the empirical examination of *treating* someone as an *object* has received little consideration until now. Rather, research has focused on *seeing* someone as an *object*. In this sense, a relevant contribution is the one from Sarah Gervais, Philippe Bernard, and colleagues who have successfully integrated research on sexual objectification with research on global vs. local perceptual processing styles. Examining automatic evaluation of sexualized targets, they showed that these targets are perceived as objects, by means of three main specific mechanisms. The first is the *sexual body part recognition bias*, i.e., the tendency to easily recognize sexual parts of the body even when they are shown in isolation - that is not in the context of entire bodies – similar to how it happens with (parts of) objects (Gervais, Vescio, Forster, Maass, & Suitner, 2012; Seitz, 2002). The second mechanism is the *inversion effect* (not applied to sexualized target), by means of which inverted stimuli are easier to recognize if they correspond to objects but not if they correspond to persons (Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012). The third mechanism is the *fungibility*, seeing sexualized target as interchangeable with similar others (Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012) by confusing face-body pairing in an experimental memory paradigm. These three lines of work converge to give a good understanding on how people are seen when they are objectified. How people are treated when they are objectified however remains a more open question, and one which is currently approached as the ‘consequences’ of objectification. Indeed and consistent with the current literature, in this review, we have included the behavioral aspects of objectification under ‘consequences’. Thus, we can see that the field has typically adopted the theoretical account of objectification as a psychological process more akin to an attitude, than the theoretical account which emphasizes objectification as an outcome, more akin to behavior.

#### *Hostile/ benevolent intent and blatant /subtle expression*

Interestingly and similarly to other forms of sexual aggression, sexual objectification can be hostile or benevolent in its intention, and blatant or subtle in its expression. Although there is no necessary correspondence between these two dimensions, we can reasonably expect that most hostile intent is typically expressed blatantly, whereas benevolent intent manifests in more subtle ways. Sexual harassment, stranger harassment, or sexual violence can be considered cases of sexual objectification with a hostile intent and a blatant expression. Here, women’s personal value is *openly* reduced to their body, and they are considered and treated as sexual objects. As Langton (2009) suggests, sexual objectification can occur not only when women are identified with their body but also when women’s value is determined on the base of their physical appearance. It is

well established that beauty ideals can be oppressive to women since they have been long considered an essentially female quality and among women's qualities the most important one (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007; Scott, 1997). In this case, hostile intent and blatant expression of objectification occur when women are openly devalued for their ugliness and not conformity to the normative model of beauty. Thus, we can see that one face of objectification is an open, hostile equation of a woman with a sexual object, reduced to an appraisal of her sexual utility for men.

We suggest that objectification does have another face however. Cases of benevolent intent/subtle expression of objectification can be found when women are prized and valued for their physical attractiveness (e.g. positive comments on their appearance) but subtly considered and treated as a decorative object posed on a pedestal. Compliments within social interactions may be seen as an emblematic case of this phenomenon. They indeed communicate not only what a specific individual appreciates but also, and more importantly, what the society as a whole values (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984). Compliments generally fall into two main categories - appearance and performance - and present a gendered nature: while appearance is more important to women who are mostly complimented on the base of that, performance is more important to men who are complimented because of their accomplishments (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Hence, since appearance is still considered the primary source of women value, the widespread social tendency to value women's appearance indicates the subordinate role society assigns to them. Thus, unlike the hostile and clear objectification outlined above, we think that objectification can appear in subtle and superficially positive forms.

#### *Automatic and Deliberate evaluation*

Sexual objectification can be the outcome of automatic or deliberate evaluations. Automatic evaluations can be activated regardless of whether a person considers these evaluations as accurate or inaccurate and as a consequence they are not necessarily personally endorsed (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Gervais and colleagues' aforementioned studies have shown the automatic cognitive component of sexual objectification indicating how sexualized targets are basically processed as objects. Deliberate evaluations regard the evaluative component of sexual objectification. Whereas the activation of automatic evaluations can occur irrespective of whether a person considers the associations to be correct or incorrect, deliberate evaluations generally pertain to the validation of evaluations and beliefs (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). As regards this point, research as shown that at an explicit and deliberate level, people deny

human nature (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) and mental states (Holland & Haslam, 2013; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013) to sexualized targets. Sexual objectification – as an attitude – occurs and can be measured at both an explicit level and an implicit level.

Whether this manifests in automatic or deliberative behavior however, awaits further inquiry.

*Summary: Objectification is complex.*

Sexual objectification can be meant as an *attitude* - a way of seeing another person as an object - and as *behavior* - a way of acting with another person treating her as an object. This distinction is particularly relevant from the target's perspective: experiencing an objectifying attitude and/or an objectifying behavior may have significant consequences for the experience of objectification and thus this distinction should be further examined from an empirical viewpoint.

Whether as an attitude or behavior, objectification can take blatant and subtle forms, and be hostile or benevolent in its intention. If we consider sexual objectification only in its blatant and hostile forms, we risk to not recognizing the negative consequences associated to its subtle, and superficially benevolent forms of objectification. Measuring these subtle, benevolent forms poses a challenge for current researchers.

Automatic and deliberate evaluations in sexual objectification pertain different processes and could result in somewhat different behavioral consequences. Research conducted in the interethnic relations field has shown for instance that automatic attitudes (implicit prejudice) tend to affect non-verbal (vs. verbal) behavior during interethnic interactions, such as limited degree of visual contact (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Differently, in sexual objectification, automatic attitudes could present opposite outcomes, i.e. less physical distance and higher visual contact - through body inspection - of the objectified target. Tentative evidence for these automatic effects has been partly shown by Gervais, Holland & Dodd (2013) who examining the objectifying gaze toward pictures of women and monitoring participants' eye movements, found that participants focused more on women's chests and waists and less on faces when they were asked to focus on the appearance (vs. personality) of women.

In sum, we can see that a fulsome definition of objectification extends beyond the reach of current research. Researchers have typically focused on attitudes and there is a serious lack of work on behavior, as there is on superficially positive or benevolent forms of objectification. However, researchers have also made inroads into both the direct and indirect, blatant and subtle forms of objectification. As both a process and an outcome, objectification is becoming increasingly tractable to experimental psychologists.



**Who are the targets of objectification?**

Since sexual objectification involves the reduction of a fully person to a sexual object, potentially any person can be objectified. Despite this potential breadth, research has shown that the burden of objectification falls disproportionately on certain types of individuals. Specifically, women tend to be more objectified than men, the weak tend to be more objectified than the powerful, and the attractive tend to be more objectified than the less attractive. In the following section we will outline evidence for differences in the extent of objectification as a function of the target.

Early theories of sexual objectification emphasized the importance of gender: objectification was something experienced by women (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). There is now overwhelming support for the claim that women experience sexual objectification. Tasks asking women to rank the importance of various body parts have found that women tend to focus on the sexualized aspects of their own bodies, at the expense of health and competence related aspects (Calogero et al., 2012; Moradi & Huang, 2008). This rank ordering which gives primacy to sexualized body parts is also found in an interpersonal context; when both women and men think about the bodies of women, they tend to consider sexualized components above other aspects of the body (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). In short, when asked about the important aspects of a woman's body, women and men tend to agree that it is her sexualized body parts.

This early evidence for the sexual objectification of women is somewhat constrained by the artificiality of the measurement; people tend not to go through life rank ordering body parts. Recent work has looked to more cognitive and behavioral measures of sexual objectification in part to redress these concerns. One vein of work has focused on memory paradigms as a mechanism for establishing the cognitive processes involved in objectification. Bernard and colleagues (Bernard et al., 2012) investigated the object inversion effect – the tendency for people to suffer a recognition deficit when viewing inverted (upside-down) images compared to non-inverted (upright) images. It has long been established within cognitive psychology that entities processed holistically or as cohesive units (such as people) suffer from an inversion effect, where entities processed analytically or as collections of smaller parts do not suffer from this effect. Bernard and colleagues reasoned that if women are viewed as objects, then they should not suffer an inversion effect. By comparing memory recognition for inverted male and female figures, they demonstrated that women are indeed cognitively processed analytically as objects rather than

people. In a similar conceptual vein, Sarah Gervais and her colleagues have shown that people are better at recognizing sexualized female – but not male – body parts when they are presented in isolation, indicative that the female body is cognitively fragmented into different sexual components (Gervais, Vescio, Forster, et al., 2012). Combined, the work of Bernard and Gervais has stepped outside of self-report measures and rank ordering tasks to demonstrate at a basic cognitive level that women are viewed as sexual objects, rather than full people. Further, both studies showed that these effects were present for female *but not male* targets, indicating that it is women who experience the greater burden of sexual objectification.

#### *Attractiveness and sexualization*

Although gender appears to be an important characteristic in who gets objectified in its own right, it is also meaningfully qualified by physical attractiveness. There is now mounting evidence that sexually attractive and sexualized people tend to be subject to higher levels of sexual objectification.

Perhaps the most direct evidence for this effect comes from work using eye-tracking methodology. Gervais and colleagues (Gervais et al., 2013) experimentally manipulated the sexual attractiveness of female targets by systematically varying images to reflect high ideal (large breasts, low waist-to-hip ratios), average ideal (average breasts, average waist-to-hip ratios), and low ideal (small breasts, high waist-to-hip ratios). They found that women with high ideal figures were subject to more sexualized body scrutiny than women with average and low ideal figures. Their work highlights how normatively attractive women are subject to higher levels of sexual objectification.

The above research has focused on the aspects of sexual objectification which emphasize the individual's sexual utility. Another aspect is the tendency to think about the individual as not being a full person, or lacking in humanity. The denial of humanity or dehumanization of others is a rich field in its own right (for a recent review see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Researchers working from an objectification perspective have found that attractive and sexualized women tend to be subject to dehumanizing aspects of sexual objectification.

In an early demonstration of this effect, Loughnan et al. (2010) demonstrated that varying an individual's sexualization changes attributions of mind. We had participants rate images of attractive women which either emphasized her face, her body, or showed her whole body. We found that more sexualized depictions elicit lower ratings of mind and moral concern, demonstrating that sexualized women are seen as relatively mindless and unworthy of moral concern. This finding has

been conceptually replicated twice since. In two follow-up studies looking at sexual objectification in a forensic context, we found that sexualized depictions of female rape victims evoked lower attributions of mind and morality (Loughnan et al., 2013), and that female victims of domestic violence were attributed lesser moral standing when shown in a sexualized manner (Pacilli, Pagliaro, Loughnan, Gramazio, & Baldry, 2013). The denial of mind to sexualized women does not appear to be limited to sexually mature females. In a study examining the impact of the sexualization of pre-pubescent girls, Holland and Haslam (2013) demonstrated that sexualized girls were viewed as lacking in mind relative to non-sexualized girls. In short, sexualized women are attributed less mind and moral standing than non-sexualized women.

Whether sexualization has a similar impact on the objectification of men is currently a debated point in the literature. Some research has shown that sexualized men are not subject to sexual objectification. For example, Bernard et al (2012) found no evidence for inversion effects for sexualized men. Likewise, Vaes et al. (2011) conducted a study exploring the implicit association of sexualized men and women with non-human entities, specifically animals. They found that sexualized women – but *not* sexualized men – were more readily associated with animal related constructs than human related constructs. These findings would seem to indicate that sexualization only increases objectification for women.

By contrast, some studies have shown that sexualized men are more objectified than non-sexualized men. We (Loughnan et al., 2010) found that sexualized men were attributed less mind than non-sexualized men, although the effect was smaller than it was for women. In a larger study, Gray and his colleagues (Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, & Barrett, 2011) found that naked and sexualized men were denied mind relative to non-sexualized men. Moving outside of self-report methodologies, memory tasks have found that sexually idealized men (large shoulders, narrow waists) were processed more like objects than normative, non-idealized men (Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012). Finally, in the largest single other-objectification study conducted to date, we (Loughnan et al., 2014) collected data from almost 600 people measuring objectification towards sexualized and non-sexualized men and women. Across this large sample, there was a significant effect of target sexualization – sexualized people were objectified more than non-sexualized people – but no effect of gender or gender by sexualization interaction; both men and women were objectified more and to a similar extent when sexualized. These four studies taken together seem to indicate that the sexualization of men increases their objectification. In sum, it appears that people are objectified more when they are presented in a sexualized manner.

### *Who is not objectified?*

The preceding section paints a relatively bleak picture; men and women are objectified, particularly when they are sexualized. However, research has started to point to limits or boundary conditions to sexual objectification. There is a growing recognition that not all people are objectified.

One paper to show an important limitation of sexual objectification focused on the role of target body weight. Holland and Haslam (2013) examined whether the well-established sexualization effect – that sexualized targets are more objectified – would hold across a range of body weights. They found that whilst average weight women were objectified, overweight women did not elicit higher levels of objectification. In essence, being overweight shielded women against the sexual objectification which typically accompanies being objectified.

Another line of work has examined whether objectification might be a primarily or even exclusively Western phenomenon. The overwhelming majority of sexual objectification research has been conducted by westerners on westerners (typically in the US, Australia, Belgium, and Italy). We (Loughnan et al., 2014) collected objectification data from almost 600 people in seven diverse nations spanning traditional research samples (the UK, US, Australia, Italy) and added samples from non-western nations (Japan, Pakistan, and India). Interestingly, while the standard sexualization effect was robustly replicated for male and female targets in western nations, it was largely absent from non-western nations. Stated otherwise, Japanese, Indian, and Pakistani people tended not to sexually objectify others when they were presented in a sexualized manner. These two studies provide important proof of concept; objectification is not applied to *all* targets.

This summary showcases much of the research on sexual objectification that has blossomed in the last few years. We now know that women tend to be objectified more than men, that men can also be objectified, and that being attractive and sexualized leads to increased objectification. We are starting to map the boundaries of sexual objectification, with emerging research indicating that possessing a non-ideal body type or simply being a non-westerner may be sufficient to protect individuals from objectification.

### **Why do people objectify?**

The above section focused on the targets or victims of objectification. In this section, we turn to the other aspect of the interpersonal dyad; the agents or perpetrators of objectification.

Research has started to examine the individual and situational factors which make people more likely to objectify others. We will focus first on characteristics of the individual, showing that sexism and aggressive sexual beliefs appear to play an important role in who engages in sexual objectification. Then, we will turn to examine the role of more transitory factors, looking at goals and priming.

### *Internal Factors*

Is there such a person as an ‘objectifier’? A person who possesses such a strong tendency to objectify that they are prone to do it across a range of situation, independent of the targets gender or sexualized attire? The earliest feminist theorizing about sexual objectification often argued that gender – specifically, being male – played an important part in whether someone engaged in objectification. Interestingly, the evidence for this very basic and longstanding claim is somewhat mixed. Some research certainly has found that men engage in more objectification than women. For example, Gervais, Holland, and Dodds (2014) recently found that men were more likely to engage in visual objectification using an eye-tracker than women. Other studies cover men’s willingness to objectify, however, tend to use only male participants (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011) or do not directly compare male and female participants (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Thus, these studies offer little insight into the role of biological sex in objectification. By contrast, numerous studies have failed to show an effect for participant gender. We (Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013) in two experimental studies did not find an effect on explicit objectification. This aligns with the failure of gender differences to emerge looking at implicit sexual objectification (Vaes et al., 2011). In the two largest studies conducted to date (Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2014), despite having over 300 participants each, gender failed to emerge as a significant factor. Contrary to early theories – and perhaps, lay wisdom – it appears that men are no more likely to engage in objectification than women.

Although there appears to be no general link between being male and objectifying others, it is clear that men who possess hostile and aggressive beliefs about women are particularly likely to objectify. Cikara and colleagues examined neural activation amongst men high and low in hostile forms of sexism and found that men with hostile sexist beliefs displayed less activity in the social areas of the prefrontal cortex (e.g., the mPFC) than men with less hostile beliefs (Cikara et al., 2011). Stepping away from general beliefs about women, men who possess aggressive sexual beliefs also appear prone to sexual objectification. Examining implicit association between women

and animals, and women and objects, Rudman and Mescher (2012) found that men with a high likelihood to sexually harass, positive attitudes towards rape, and a high likelihood to engage in rape were more likely to objectify women. These effects have typically been interpreted using the inverse causal direction (i.e., that men who objectify hold more positive attitudes towards sexual violence), however the reverse direction is also quite possible. These effects held when controlling for generally negative beliefs about women (e.g., hostile sexism). Thus, although it is likely false to say that simply being male confers a higher risk of sexual objectification, it appears that being a male who does not like women and is likely to harass and rape them, is associated with objectifying beliefs.

Since objectification is also common amongst women, we may begin to wonder what characteristics of women increase their likelihood to engage in sexual objectification. One strong identified predictor of female objectification is that woman's tendency to self-objectify (Strelan & Hargraves, 2005; see also Moradi & Huang, 2010). In some ways this is unsurprising; women who tend to focus on the sexualized appearance of themselves also direct this gaze outwards towards others. Indeed, given that self-objectification has been postulated to reflect an *internalized* third-party perspective on the self, it may well be the case that interpersonal sexual objectification precedes self-objectification. In this way, it may be more appropriate to speak about other-objectification predicting self-objectification. This question could well be answered from a developmental perspective, however these approaches are typically not employed in objectification research. Just as negative attitudes towards women play an important role in whether a man is likely to objectify, it appears that women's attitudes towards sexualized women are also important. Vaes and colleagues (2011) have shown that it is women who view sexualized women as a distinct, disliked subcategory of women who tend to engage in more sexual objectification. Thus, negative attitudes may reflect a common path through which objectification flows for both sexes.

### *Environmental Factors*

We have dedicated some time to mapping out the stable, individual factors that influence people's tendency to objectify. This has revealed a potential common route via negative attitudes, and cast doubt on the central role of gender in determining who objectifies. In the remainder of this section, we turn to more transitory factors which might lead to greater sexual objectification.

Sexual desire appears to play an important role in men's sexual objectification. Men tend to sexually objectify people they are attracted to, whether they be male or female (Kozak, Frankenhauser, & Roberts, 2009; Vaes et al., 2011). Experimental research has recently corroborated these correlational findings by manipulation men's sex or mating goal. Confer and colleagues (Confer, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010) led men to have either a long-term (partnership) or short-term (sexual) mating. They then presented these men with potential female partners who had their face and body occluded separately. The men were allowed to select one of the two panels to reveal to aid them in making a decision. Compared to men with the relationship goal, men with a sex goal tended to reveal the woman's body rather than her face, preferring to view her body. Some recent, unpublished work has shown the same preferential attention to the sexualized body amongst men with a chronic short-term mating goal (Eyssel, Süssenbach, Loughnan, & Bentler, 2013). In this study, we (Eyssel et al, 2013) measured short-term mating and eye-movements for sexualized targets. We found that men with a short-term mating goal tended to spend more time looking at the body – rather than the face – of women.

The research above used either chronic sexual goals or situationally induced sex goals to increase objectification. However, sex can play a more subtle role in creating sexual objectification. Vaes and colleagues (Vaes et al., 2011) exposed men to a word search task which contained subtle and ambiguous sex prime terms (e.g., bed, stiff). They found that men – but not women – exposed to these terms were more likely to objectify sexualized women. A similar effect has been demonstrated by Rudman and Borgida (1995). They exposed male participants to either sexualized or non-sexualized advertisements as part of a cover task. Then, the primed participants interacted with a naïve female confederate who was ostensibly an interviewee for a job in the laboratory. They found that sex primed men tended to focus on how the woman looked, recalling better what she was wearing, but tended not to focus on what she said, recalling worse the answers she had given to their questions. In short, for men, situations which remind them of sex or explicit sex goals seem to increase the tendency to sexually objectify.

Sex may also play an important role in why women objectify others, although hostility and aggression appear less central. Work by Puvia and Vaes (2013) explore the idea that women's competition with other women might lead to increased sexual objectification. They found that women who perceived high levels of heterosexual competition – competition for male attention and selection by other women – were particularly likely to engage in sexual objectification. Specifically, they were prone to seeing other women as more animal like and less human. These

findings have recently been corroborated in the dehumanization domain. Research examining the impact of ovulation on dehumanization has found that ovulating women – who tend to focus more on heterosexual competition – were more likely to dehumanize other women (Piccolo, Carnaghi, & Foroni, 2013). Competition, whether caused by ovulation or not, appears to play an important role in the dehumanizing aspects of objectification.

In this section we have examined who is likely to engage in objectification. We have seen that objectification is enacted by both genders, and that sex plays an important role. For men, hostile and aggressive sexual beliefs, and active sex goals and primes, all tend to increase their tendency to objectify women. For women, thinking of the self as a sexual object (self-objectification) and perceiving sexual competition in the environment is linked to greater sexual objectification. We now move to outlining the consequences of being objectified.

### **Consequences of Objectification**

Research has shown that sexual objectification exerts several negative effects on how objectified individuals are seen and treated. We will henceforth distinguish these consequences along the attitude/behavior distinction previously proposed.

#### *How they are seen (attitudes)?*

Objectification changes the way people are viewed, and two findings seem particularly likely to be linked to changes in behavior: perceived lack of competency and lack of moral standing.

Competence is one of the fundamental dimensions of social perception (Fiske, Glick, Cuddy, & Xu, 2002) and is closely linked to the status afforded to a person or group within society. Further, it plays a predictable role in hiring, promotion, and firing decisions in workplace settings. There is some evidence that the objectified are viewed as less competent. In an early study, we (Loughnan et al., 2010) measured the perceived intelligence of sexualized men and women and found that sexualized targets were viewed as possessing significantly lower IQs. Likewise, Heflick and colleagues (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011) found that sexually objectified targets were seen as lacking in competence – and additionally warmth and morality. These effects are not limited to sexually mature individuals; Graff and colleagues (Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012) have found that girls depicted in sexualized clothes were perceived as less intelligent, competence, and determined by adults of both genders. This general perception of a lack of competence appears to have a flow on effect. We (Loughnan et al., 2010) found that sexualized targets were also judged



as less capable or well suited to performing a range of everyday jobs. This appears to hold for jobs far beyond the everyday; focusing on the appearance of US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin reduced people's desire to vote for her (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Given that experiencing sexual objectification actually reduces women's intellectual performance (Gay & Castano, 2010), it is easy to see how this can become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In addition to being viewed as less competent, sexually objectified targets are viewed as less worthy of moral concern. Research has shown that when persons are sexually objectified their moral relevance decreases significantly and they are seen as suffering less (Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013). Interestingly, we (Pacilli et al., 2013) recently found that objectified women are perceived as lacking morality in two ways. First, they are seen as lacking moral standing, therefore not deserving our moral consideration. Second, they are also perceived as immoral or bad women who are dishonest and untrustworthy. The effects of being seen as lacking moral standing are considerable. Sexualized rape victims are viewed as suffering less as a result of being raped, in part because we care less about them (Loughnan et al., 2013). Further, when a sexualized woman is subject to physical assault, people are less willing to intervene on her behalf (Pacilli et al., 2013). The loss of moral standing that accompanies being objectified may help us understand why men who objectify women are inclined to harass, assault, and rape them (Rudman & Mescher, 2012).

#### *How they are treated?*

There are several actions – generally directed to women – through which sexual objectification can occur. When sexual objectified, women can be treated as *something* from which men feel entitled to take advantage for sexual pleasure. A relevant case of women being treated as sexual objects is sexual harassment, which presents different manifestations such as sexual coercion or unwanted sexual attention (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Research has shown that making salient female sexual objectification increase men's tendency to sexually harass women. In the previously cited research by Rudman and Borgida (1995), it was showed that after watching television commercials with women presented as sexual objects, male participants interviewing a female confederate job applicant tended to sit closer to the candidate and asking her more inappropriate questions. Similar results were found by Galdi, Mass and Cadinu (in press), who found that exposure to objectifying television programs increased male participants proclivity for sexual harassment against women, as measured by sending to a female partner sexual/sextist jokes

during a computer interaction. In short, being exposed to sexually objectified depictions of women increases unwanted or uninvited sexual behaviors towards women.

As sexual objects, women can be treated as not fully human and so as social entities missing complete citizenship. An interesting example of this phenomenon is stranger harassment, which corresponds to unwanted sexual attention perpetrated by strangers in public places, such as streets or public transportation (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). These verbal (e.g., vulgar comments on appearance) and non-verbal (e.g., gazing insistently women's bodies, whistling at women, etc.) communications generally refer to women's bodies or sexual parts of their body. The place where stranger harassment occurs is crucial to understand its social function. Women are indeed treated as their right of using public spaces as citizens is minor of men's one and as their freedom is limited (Bowman, 1993). If this message is often hidden in Westernized countries, it is clearer in non-Westernized ones where stranger harassment invests often women who do not conform to the traditional precepts - such as traditional long dresses – breaking the rules regarding their place in social hierarchy (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2012).

*Internalizing the objectification of others: The case of Self-objectification*

Sexual objectification occurs when a person is reduced to the status of a non-human, sexual object, self-objectification is the psychological state in which the same objectifying perspective becomes the main way through which a person perceives themselves (Calogero et al., 2012; De Beauvoir, 1949; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Several studies have shown the detrimental consequences of self-objectification on individuals' wellbeing (for a review see Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). It is indeed positively associated with depressive symptoms (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002, Szymanski & Henning, 2007), eating disorders (Calogero 2009; Moradi, Dirks & Matteson 2005), poor interoceptive awareness (Peat & Muehlenkamp, 2011), sexual dysfunction (Calogero & Thomspson, 2009; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008), substance abuse (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011) and psychological dissociation and self-harm behaviours (Erchull, Liss & Lichiello, 2013). Harmful effects extend also to the quality of cognitive and physical performance of people who self-objectify. Research has shown that a state of self-objectification decreases individuals' performance through the disruption of focused attention (for a review see Quinn, Chaudoir & Kallen, 2011).

Self-objectified individuals perceive and treat their bodies as visible objects which continuously need surveillance (McKinley, 2011; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). As the French

philosopher Foucault (1975) has argued, surveillance presents a crucial social function since power can be exercised at its best through surveillance itself. He adopts the metaphor of the Panopticon, the ideal prison proposed by Bentham in the eighteenth century to explain this point. This is cylinder-shaped building with prisoners' cells placed along the circle and the guard at the centre. For the prisoners the feeling is to be always visible, while the guard remains in the dark and watch without being seen. Progressively, this disciplinary gaze is internalized by prisoners who come to control themselves. The metaphor of the panopticon fits with the status of women in a patriarchal society (McKinley, 2011). As the prisoners do not know exactly when they will be controlled and because of this they start to control autonomously themselves, women internalize the judgmental male gaze on their body, making surveillance as a distinctive way of being. Self-surveillance becomes a way to self-discipline their own femininity since female body is meant as an entity that needs to be systematically corrected and improved in its appearance. But, the ideal model of female beauty is so difficult to achieve that for women taking care of their body becomes a full-time commitment and so turns into a powerful tool of social control (Wolf, 1991). These theoretical considerations have been empirically shown. Indeed, research has indicated that self-objectification in women - considered as a stable trait or experimentally induced state - is associated with a greater tendency to justify gender inequalities as well as to a lower propensity to political commitment and active participation to overcome these inequalities (Calogero, 2013; Calogero & Jost, 2011). Thus, we can see that one of the consequences of sexual objectification may be to come to objectify the self. In doing so, women can drastically limit their ability to resist and reject this harmful form of self-surveillance and self-censorship.

### ***Future Directions***

Until now research on objectifying perception of visual stimuli has typically considered pictures depicting women with visible body and minimal clothing such as swimsuit or underwear (Bernard et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013; Vaes et al., 2011), pictures with women with sexually provocative positions (Vaes et al. 2011; Puvia & Vaes, 2013) or whose body corresponds to the current standard of beauty (Gervais et al., 2013; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012; Gervais, Vescio, Forster, et al., 2012). Future research should try to deepen our understanding of how target appearance can influence its perception comparing the different images in order to understand which of them can trigger more objectification effects. Research on sexual objectification has considered these stimuli as interchangeable elements of the same category, but it is not yet established that they are equivalent or comparable.

A great deal of previous objectification research has focused on either how people view themselves (self-objectification) or how people view others (other-objectification). A third, largely unexplored possibility would be to examine how people experience being objectified by others. That is, not how the perceiver enacts interpersonal objectification, but how the target experiences it. Work by Chen et al (2013) has already shown how this might be achieved experimentally, revealing that experiences of objectification undermine women's sense of themselves as moral entities. Future work might take this into the workplace to explore how it affects workplace performance, or into a relationships context to examine how it alters women's experience of romantic relationships.

Much of the work on sexual objectification has drawn on dehumanization. However, at the moment, some of that work has focused on seeing women as animals (e.g., Vaes et al., 2011; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Building from this finding, we might be able to move towards a more nuanced understanding of precisely which aspects of animality are being attributed to objectified women. When women's social behaviour is perceived and explained mainly in terms of biological/reproductive functions of their body (as often happens for animals) we can speak of *biologization*. Historically, women have been regarded as more connected to the nature. In the socially determined dualism between nature-culture, body-mind, irrationality-rationality, women have been over the centuries constantly associated to the first element of the pair and often their mental states have been explained through their biology (Bordo, 1993; De Beauvoir, 1949). An example is the ancient but still widespread idea that women's attitudes and behavior are deeply affected by their menstrual cycle (Chrisler & Caplan, 2002). Explaining women's behavior in terms of their menstrual cycle corresponds to reduce the complexity of women behavior to a discrete biological event and could determine negative significant consequences regarding humanity assigned to women themselves. The links between women's bodies, their sexuality, and their dehumanization appears to be an important domain for future work on sexual objectification.

At the start of this paper we highlighted that objectification can be a process or an outcome. Further, that outcome could be an attitude or behavior. The majority of research has focused on the attitudinal and process characteristics of objectification. Although this has shed considerable light on how people view the objectified, it has left largely unexplored the behavioral consequences of objectification. This is problematic because it is precisely these consequences that will have the most direct implications for limiting the damage caused by objectification. We already know that objectification reduces intellectual performance (Gay & Castano, 2010) and

social engagement (Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010), and examining how these decrements influence the way objectified others are treated in real world settings poses a challenge for future research.

### Conclusions

The field of sexual objectification is experiencing rapid growth. From being unstudied less than two decades ago, to largely focused around the self until five years ago, the flourishing of research in this field has shed important light on how people can become mere objects. As the field develops, theoretical models of objectification have started to expand to capture the range of characteristics: the subtle and the blatant, the attitudinal and the behavioral, the hostile and the benevolent. At present, it seems to us that our theories of objectification far outstrip our empirical evidence, and finding new ways to measure this diversity of objectification will allow us to more fully and completely investigate this widespread, important, and damaging phenomenon.

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